

## **FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

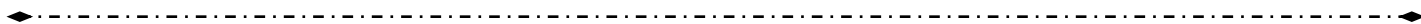
**Meeting Date:** November 7, 2017

**Agenda Item:** Wolf Creek Conservation Easement (R4)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Endorsement

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 Min



### **Background:**

FWP proposed a conservation easement (CE) on the Central Montana Chapter of Pheasants Forever's (CMPF's) 1,000-acre "Wolf Creek property" adjacent to the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Since its purchase by CMPF in 2008, the property has been managed under a partnership between CMPF and FWP, resulting in considerable habitat improvement projects on both the Wolf Creek parcel and Beckman WMA. Recently, CMPF approached FWP to sell a CE on the Wolf Creek property to ensure the property's conservation values are maintained, while also providing funding to further support the chapter's conservation efforts for upland game birds, other wildlife species, and public access.

The Wolf Creek property is bisected by Wolf Creek and contains numerous coulees coupled with upland habitat improvements. The property supports a mixture of native vegetation and additional forage resources afforded by agricultural fields, contiguous with the Beckman WMA. The parcel connects a network of public lands or lands accessible to free public hunting through contractual agreements with FWP, providing nearly 15,000-acres of continuous land open to the public—from Wolf Creek to the Judith River. A conservation easement would assure the conservation values are retained in perpetuity.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results:**

FWP Region 4 would implement a public involvement process under Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) and subsequently make a recommendation to the Commission, also pending the outcomes of negotiations with the seller and appraisals.

### **Alternatives and Analysis:**

No action is the only likely alternative to this proposal. The CMPF has no imminent intentions to sell the property, although the habitat improvements that have taken place on the property, in addition to its strategic location between blocks of public ground, increase its value to a recreational buyer. The future is unknown, and unforeseen circumstances that could potentially force the sale of the property would put it in possible danger of conversion, development, or, more likely, an end to public access to this parcel via sale to a recreational buyer.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale:**

FWP recommends endorsement of this CE proposal, which would ensure retention of wildlife habitat and recreation values adjacent to Beckman WMA while also perpetuating agricultural functions.

### **Proposed Motion:**

I move the Commission endorse the Wolf Creek conservation easement proposal, allowing FWP to conduct further negotiations and complete associated analysis and public review.